

# Safe Handling of Pet Rodents

Rodents can make wonderful pets, but like all animals, they can carry germs that can make people sick. Safe handling of rodents is important to prevent illness in people.



**Pet rodents** can carry germs in their digestive system (from the mouth to the stomach to the intestines) and shed germs in their feces (droppings).

Germs, such as the bacteria *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter*, may be present in the droppings of pet rodents even if the animals appear to be healthy. If these germs are accidentally eaten, when a person touches the droppings (or the animal) and later touches his or her mouth, or prepares food without washing his or her hands first, the person may become ill.

Symptoms of infection in people include diarrhea, fever, vomiting and abdominal cramps. Children are especially at risk for becoming infected because they are more likely to put their hands in their mouths after handling a pet. Anyone can become ill from these germs, but young children, the elderly, and people with weakened immune systems may develop more serious illness.



## What other germs can be spread by pet rodents?

Another germ that can cause illness is a virus called **lymphocytic choriomeningitis virus** or LCMV. This virus is carried by wild mice, which can then infect people or pet rodents. Saliva, urine, droppings or soiled bedding from infected rodents may be contaminated with the virus and can be a source of infection in people. As with *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter*, animals infected with LCMV may look healthy, so it is difficult to tell if an animal is carrying the virus just by looking at it.

Most people who become infected with LCMV will not become sick or will develop mild flu-like symptoms. However, people with weakened immune systems can have more severe illness. In addition, infection during pregnancy may lead to health problems with the developing baby, although it is not known how often this happens. **To be safe, pregnant women and people with weakened immune systems should not bring a new pet rodent into their household and should limit their contact with pet rodents they already have.**



## *To handle pet rodents safely, take the following precautions:*

- **Always wash hands with soap and water after handling pet rodents;** use waterless alcohol-based gels or hand rubs when soap is not available.
- Keep rodent cages clean and free of soiled bedding.
- Clean the cage in a well-ventilated area or outside.
- Wash hands thoroughly with soap and water after cleaning up pet droppings.
- Closely supervise young children, especially those less than five years old, when cleaning cages, and make sure they wash their hands immediately after handling rodents and rodent cages or bedding.
- Do not kiss pet rodents or hold them close to your face.
- Because pregnant women and persons with weakened immune systems are at higher risk for more serious illness, rodents should be cared for by someone who is not pregnant and/or living with a weakened immune system.
- Never allow pet rodents to come into contact with wild rodents or their droppings or nests.



## **For more information about handling pets safely, see:**

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website, “Healthy Pets Healthy People” at <http://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/index.htm>.
- The Massachusetts Department of Public Health website at <http://www.mass.gov/dph/cdc/epii/epi.htm#pet> or call the Division of Epidemiology and Immunization at 617-983-6800 or toll free at 1-888-658-2850.
- Or call your veterinarian.

